

May 31, 2009 - Murtha can do no Wrong in Johnstown

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

www.post-gazette.com

Murtha can do no wrong in Johnstown

Military trade show another
example of lawmaker's clout

By Timothy McNulty, Pittsburgh
Post-Gazette

Sunday, May 31, 2009

JOHNSTOWN

-- The War Memorial Arena here looks like any other old hockey barn, but to hear John Murtha speak about what happens inside, it sounds more like an ark.

Federal funds rebuilt Johnstown after floods in 1936 and 1977, he told his annual gathering of military contractors inside the arena last week, and it took hundreds of millions more in federal earmark dollars to save the town after its industrial collapse a generation ago.

The bulk has gone to local defense firms that got contracts from the federal government, or partnered with the giant, international contractors who depend on the powerful House defense appropriations chairman for work. Federal investigators now are probing firms tied to Mr. Murtha, while critics continually lambaste his willful use of earmarks -- the federal funds sent to local projects with little debate or oversight.

Mr. Murtha made no apologies for his tactics and the trade show -- called the Showcase for Commerce -- filled up every nook and cranny of the 59-year-old War Memorial Arena as usual, critics be damned.

"This showcase has been the key to our economic survival," he told the friendly crowd in a welcoming speech Thursday night. "These contractors come in here because of me, but I tell you this, they come in because you save them money and you do quality work and that's what brings them back year after year and I applaud that."

Mr. Murtha is treated like a god throughout the two-day event, with contractors literally bending down almost on their knees to talk to him. He is forced often to sit, due to recent knee surgery. That ended at a brief news conference Friday morning.

His office had just announced \$110 million in federal contract awards to local firms, but a reporter wanted to get his reaction to the federal investigation of Kuchera Defense Systems, which is among the congressman's biggest campaign contributors. The imposing, white-maned 76-year-old flashed some righteous anger.

"So what's that got to do with me?" the 6-foot-6-inch former Marine replied. "What do you think, I oversee these companies? That's the Defense Department's job. That's not my job. You guys write these stories [but] you don't have a clue what this is all about."

"Jesus Christ," he exclaimed, then left out a back door.

The inside of the Cambria County War Memorial Arena was jammed with red, white and blue balloons and a giant American flag. Atop center ice, where the 1977 hockey classic "Slap Shot" was filmed, were high-priced convention booths from defense giants such as General Dynamics, Raytheon, Lockheed Martin and Boeing.

Mr. Murtha worked the main center aisle on opening night. He had promised to personally visit all 170 vendor booths at the show, which is one reason firms sign up, knowing they will get his ear.

He visited the Kuchera Defense Systems booth, where a German-designed robot manufactured by the Windber firm dropped a pile of Tootsie Rolls into his hands.

Company co-owner Bill Kuchera showed him the robot and then the company's new, energy-efficient LED street lights embedded with security cameras. Starting as a computer-based business in 1985, the firm is now a major defense contractor and contributor to Mr. Murtha's campaigns, with family members giving him some \$24,000 in the past five years.

"He's the best of the best of the best in the world," said Mr. Kuchera. "There ain't nobody better than Mr. Murtha."

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and other agencies raided the offices of KDS, affiliate Kuchera Industries, and its owners' homes in January. Last month, the Navy barred Kuchera from receiving contracts pending the outcome of federal investigations. "That's currently under appeal," Mr. Kuchera said.

Just six booths down, Mr. Murtha also visited Concurrent Technologies Corp., which has a subsidiary under investigation, too. Starting with 13 employees 22 years ago in Johnstown, the research and development firm now employs 1,500 in 20 offices nationwide.

President and CEO Ed Sheehan Jr. showed Mr. Murtha two of the firm's biggest current projects: a device for stopping rogue vehicles at military checkpoints and new technologies for fabricating light but tough aluminum armor for military vehicles.

Concurrent Technologies has had booths at the Showcase For

Commerce in each of the 19 years it has been held. Any questions about the propriety of Mr. Murtha's earmarks have created "no cloud at all" over the event, Mr. Sheehan said.

"Elected representatives in other districts try to get earmarks to energize their businesses. There's nothing wrong with that."

His firm no longer takes federal earmark funds and now wins funding through competitive bids. But he said they were important in getting the company off the ground. "We make no apologies at all," he said.

The investigations continue. A federal grand jury has subpoenaed records of another appropriations committee member, U.S. Rep. Pete Visclosky, D-Indiana, in a criminal probe involving PMA Group, a lobbying firm tied to Mr. Murtha that specialized in providing congressional earmarks to defense contractors.

Johnstown, the defense industry and Mr. Murtha are inexorably linked. The show is certainly about him -- look hard enough and the congressman is in almost every photo in its official brochure, like a game of "Where's Waldo?" It is also about linking small, local firms to big, international ones.

"It gives us a chance to interface with some of the bigger companies out there. We're a small company and we might not have a good opportunity to meet otherwise," said Bob Warren, director of quality control for PDS Industries in Irwin, which makes parts for Apache helicopters, F-22 jet fighters and other military vehicles.

The show is one of the ways the company hooked up with Bell Helicopter, of Dallas, which goes to the Showcase and 37 similar shows to meet subcontractors that provide it with parts and know-how. The Department of Defense mandates that large firms involve smaller ones in their bids, noted Matt Dapson, a government affairs officer for Textron, Bell's parent firm.

That is the reason Mr. Murtha created the show and why he keeps pushing it now, even as investigators look into the web of federal funding, lobbying, contracts and campaign contributions around him. It is why he told the Post-Gazette in March that "If I'm corrupt, it's because I take care of my district."

It's also why Johnstown's JWF Industries has this sign on its plant just outside downtown Johnstown, in the old lower mill abandoned by Bethlehem Steel: "We Support John Murtha. He Delivers for Us."

Mr. Murtha's office announced Friday morning that JWF was one of three local firms splitting \$110 million in new defense contracts. It got \$24 million for assembly of military vehicles. CTC got \$16 million for a Marine Corps data program and another \$50 million for services to the Department of Defense and other agencies. Martin-Baker America, a Johnstown subsidiary of the English firm, won a \$20 million contract for Air Force ejection seats.

Jeff Wood, the Johnstown general manager of DRS Technologies -- a defense manufacturing firm employing 900 workers -- summed up the warm feelings at the show's opening ceremonies.

"Congressman Murtha, I am very proud to be standing on the platform with you," he said.

"You continue to serve your constituents in a very honorable way, and your concern for our local people and your support of the businesses that create high-paying jobs in our community must be commended. Your efforts have helped us weather the ongoing economic crisis, and I thank you for that."

Cheers erupted and Jack Murtha waved to the crowd.